

## Assisted Suicide and Academic Suicide

*Paul Begin*

Over the summer of 2015, *The Economist* ran an editorial article about the state of assisted suicide in “Western” countries. The subtitle made clear the editorial viewpoint: “Doctors should be able to help the suffering and terminally ill die when they choose” (“The Right to Die”). While this publication may not necessarily represent the viewpoint of all, it does make a case that a majority of polling citizens within Western European countries, the United States, and Canada favor the right to assisted suicide in certain circumstances, namely terminal illness. In fact, *The Economist* avers that the assisted suicide laws that are in effect in places such as Oregon (United States) do not go far enough. Assisted suicide laws should also provide for those in mental anguish, because, “mental pain is as real as physical pain, even though it is harder for onlookers to gauge. [ . . . ] Doctor-assisted death on grounds of mental suffering should therefore be allowed” (“The Right to Die”). With laws along these lines, long-term physical and mental suffering, such as that experienced by Ramón Sampederro, would create a path toward assisted suicide. Yet the path toward a more accepting view of providing assisted suicide as a basic human right has been slow and is certainly not imminent everywhere. The question I have is thus: If everyone is for assisted suicide, why is it not yet a universal right?

My essay for *Ethics of Life: Contemporary Iberian Debates* deals with the film *Mar adentro*, the issue of assisted suicide, and the fundamental concept of human freedom. My aim is to place the film and the contemporary debate on assisted suicide within the wider context of human liberty and democratic convention. The overwhelming consensus, as seen in *The Economist*, is to consider assisted suicide or the right to die a democratic right based on a notion of freedom defined as full autonomy. Death no longer precludes that right, as Enlightenment thinkers once held.

As the filmic discourse suggests, we are in the midst of a major shift in how we define human life and values. Pluralism, itself a fruit of Enlightenment freedom of thought, and empiricism have both played a

major role in this development. If natural law previously lead thinkers to forbid men from doing that which was destructive to their own lives because of claims to what Rousseau called “absolute values,” current beliefs about what constitutes the good life increasingly seem to rest on more empirical accounts of human flourishing, with the body as a primary site of identity and value. In this way, we can see a link between Ramón’s claim to his body as personal property and issues, such as the debate over stem-cell research, modern eugenics, and the expanding field of neuroscience. Stem-cell research aims to improve human life through biological re-creation. Modern scientific forms of eugenics, that is, the active choosing of traits through DNA sorting, is the manipulation of physiology as a means of trying to secure a better life, usually for one’s children. Personality disorders are increasingly explained by looking at neural pathways instead of childhood experience. Indeed, this steady but palpable change in empirical understanding of what it means to be human, as well as the critique of values based on metaphysical claims, seems to have upended the platonic ideal of what defines human flourishing. If humans are increasingly looked at as socio-biological beings, not metaphysical ones endowed with certain traits, then the body, logically, is a major site of exploration and should hold vast importance in how laws are conceived. In a strange way, the body is simultaneously sacred, not as a receptacle for the soul, but as an end in itself and a prized possession, as a brief scan of supermarket magazines make clear. And if the body were indeed of paramount importance, then a hopelessly non-functional body would be felt as form of injustice. This would certainly impact the way in which we consider assisted suicide in Ramón’s case.

Such a shift does, however, create some unintended consequences. Ramón’s brother in the film reacts to his decision to be put to death by comparing him to a dog (“como un can”). He has a point; if there is nothing sacred about life, as Ramón avers, then why not end it when it becomes too much to bear, psychologically or physically, as we would with any other sentient being, such as dog? Here is one place in which my essay links up with some of the others in our volume on ethics of life. Terms such as “anthropomorphism,” “anthropocene,” and posthumanist” are part of the critical vocabulary of several of the essays in our volume, some of which contest the division between nonhuman human objects and the strictly human. Maybe this is where we are going as a society in terms of understanding the context of life, for example, as we continue to speak of the “humane” treatment of animals. If so, decisions about life (and death) will then need to be consistent. If the hierarchy between the human life and nonhuman life is arbitrary, thus assuming that all organisms are equal in “rights,” then we will need to treat animals like humans or treat humans like animals. I, for one, am not convinced that this is the proper view. While I

live in a part of the world in which there is no shortage of luxury pet hotels, I have yet to see a pet mortuary. Going back to the question posed earlier about why laws have not caught up with what is supposedly the common sentiment in favor of assisted suicide, my view is that this is because of a dual impulse in which citizens simultaneously want to prevent human suffering (thus granting assisted suicide for the likes of Ramón Sampedro), but are afraid to legalize it and see such acts become regular because there is still something singular about human consciousness.

There is no question that we live in symbiosis with nonhuman forms of life, and that we need to work harder to recognize the impact of our footprint on our environment so as preserve and improve our increasingly fragile ecology. In this regard, we do need to constantly reassess our ethics, and several of the pieces I have read in our debates have informed my understanding of the Iberian Peninsula, Europe, and even the United States in a way that will nourish classroom discussion. However, to move toward a position in which hierarchies are “fantasies” seems to be trendy and, worse, denies the scientific evidence which points to a vast chasm between human consciousness and the brain life of all other life forms. Medical researchers Lewis, Amini, and Lannon note:

Human beings have the largest neocortex-to-brain ratio of any creature, an inequitable proportion that confers upon us the capacity to reason. Capacious neocortical abstraction also underlies the uniquely human gift of spoken and written language, in which meaningless squawks and squiggles stand for real people, objects, and actions. (30)

Regardless of brain size, it is the highly developed neocortex that creates the major distinction, or hierarchy, if you will. Indeed, it is what has allowed humans to raise questions about the nature of the good and the limits of freedom within society. Meanwhile, as a society, we rarely flinch when putting a sick animal out of its misery. There is an instinctual knowledge of human difference if not an empirically backed one. Humans are exceptional, even if we are not independent from our shared environment. In fact, it is this hierarchy that has led to the creation of the humanities in the first place. To argue that hierarchies in life forms are not empirically grounded is not only to critique our enterprise from the inside, but rather it is itself a form of disciplinary self-immolation.

As we frequently read, there are lots of challenges facing the humanities right now. Among the many obstacles we face is the fact that many students (or more likely their parents) see more relevance in degrees in marketing or psychopharmacology than in philosophy or history. But if the humanities gives way to a post-humanities and environmental humanities, well, there will soon no longer be a humanities, just the hard sciences, business, a few

sociologists and the occasional Bill McKibben to offer critical insight. An understanding of big questions about life via great works of human consciousness (novels, histories, films) will no longer be necessary, but as an occasional hobby. We will transition from Proust to gathering ethnographic data on the impact of shearing on the mood of sheep and quality of their wool. On the other hand, we can offer in the humanities good, solid reflection on the human condition, which will sometimes include engagement with the environment, especially in a time such as ours, in which engagement with ethical issues surrounding GMOs and global warming are truly pressing. But, as Sebastiaan Faber points out, we need to do this in a way that is broadly accessible and engaging, in particular for our students, so that they more aware of themselves and the impact of their actions as they go forth into society. I still consider this to be the task of the humanities—they are issues of vital importance to humans as understood by humans.

### Works Cited

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